

John the Baptiser

Reading: Isaiah 40:3 “..The voice of one crying in the wilderness.....”

Introduction:

Various Old Testament writers made prophecies about the coming Messiah. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see how passages such as **Psalm 16:10; 22:16-18; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-5; 53:1-12** and **Micah 5:2-4** relate to the events surrounding the birth, life and death of Jesus when He was here on earth. But the prophet Isaiah also spoke of another – someone who would “...*prepare the way of the Lord...*” (**Isaiah 40:3**) – someone who would have a specific job to do as a lead-up to the Lord starting His ministry. Based on the context, and what is said in **Matthew 3:3**, we know that the person being referred to is John¹ the Baptiser².

We can see from the reading that John was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. In a sense, he was preparing the “transition” between the Old Law and the New Covenant. In **Matthew 3:2** he taught, “*Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand*”. In other words, the kingdom - the church - was very close in time; it was imminent. (Jesus also made similar statements – see **Matthew 4:17**).

But how much do we know about John – other than the fact that he was baptising people (**John 3:23**), had simple clothes, and an unusual diet (**Matthew 3:4**)? And what lessons can we learn as we look at the life of John?

LESSON

1) John’s life

a) His conception and birth

John’s conception and birth was one of those rare occasions we see in the scriptures where God intervened to make possible the seemingly impossible³. His parents were both elderly, god-fearing people, descendants of Aaron. His father, Zacharias, was a priest of the division of Abijah⁴. His mother, Elizabeth, was barren – in other words, she was unable to have children (**Luke 1:5-7**).

But on one occasion while Zacharias was serving in the Temple, an angel appeared to him and told him that he and his wife would have a son⁵. The son was to be called “John” (**Luke 1:8-13**). The angel also told Zacharias the future role that John would play. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit “...*even from his mother’s womb...*”⁶, and would “...*turn many of the*

¹ This John is not the same John as the apostle John. The apostle John was a fisherman, the brother of James, son of Zebedee. The Gospel of John was written by the apostle John (**John 21:20-25**)

² I use the term “*Baptiser*” in order to distinguish him from the religious denomination called “Baptist”.

³ Other examples are the conception of Isaac (**Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-2**) and Samuel (**1 Samuel 1:1-20**)

⁴ **1 Chronicles 24:1-19** – the divisions were based on the descendants of Eleazar and Ithamar, sons of Aaron. The division of Abijah was the 8th out of 24 divisions (vs. **10**).

⁵ The wording of vs. **13** possibly suggests that Zacharias had prayed at some point for a son.

⁶ This may explain why the unborn baby jumped when Mary visited (**Luke 1:41**).

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children of Israel to the Lord their God...” (**Luke 1:15-16**). “*He would also go before Him (God) in the spirit and power of Elijah...*” and to “*...make ready a people prepared for the Lord...*” (**Luke 1:17**). These prophecies indicated that John would not be just an ordinary prophet, because Elijah was remembered as one of the key prophets⁷ of the Old Testament (**Matthew 27:47; John 1:21**).

As a sign to show that these things would really happen, Zacharias was made mute until after John was born and named (**Luke 1:19-20; 57-64**).

In keeping with the command of God in **Genesis 17:9-13**, John was circumcised on the 8th day. It was also on this day that he was named.

Note: From **Luke 1:59-61**, it seems that the name “John” would not have been the normal or traditional name to be given to the child. But it was the name that God had chosen (**Luke 1:13**).

After these things, Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied about the ministry that John would undertake in preparing the way of the Lord (**Luke 1:67-79**).

Not much more is mentioned of John’s early years, other than “*...the hand of the Lord was with him..*” (**Luke 1:66b**), and that he “*...grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation (i.e. came out to preach) to Israel..*” (**Luke 1:80**).

b) His ministry

The main purpose of John’s ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus. His work was authorised by God (**John 1:6**), and fulfilled the prophecy of **Isaiah 40:3 (John 1:23)**. His role was not just to baptise, but also to teach and preach (**Luke 3:18**). He was to get people thinking about spiritual matters; the coming Messiah (**John 1:7**), and the need for repentance (**Matthew 3:8-10**). In **Luke 3:11-14**, we can see how he taught on the practical side of repentance; giving examples of how people’s lives should “*...bear fruits worthy of repentance...*” (**Luke 3:8a**). He spoke of;

- sharing with those in need (vs.11)
- being honest in your work (vs.13)
- treating others with respect and being truthful (vs.14)
- and being content with what you have (vs.14)

In fact, because of the nature of his work, some even thought that he might have been the Messiah himself (**Luke 3:15**). But John told them “(No)...*I am not the Christ...*” (**John 1:20b**), and confirmed that there was One coming after him who was “*...mightier than I...*” (**Luke 3:16**) – a reference to Jesus, the one to whom all should turn and follow.

His teaching and preaching was mostly done in the wilderness, away from the cities and towns (**Matthew 3:1**). He baptised people at Bethabara, located beyond the Jordan⁸ (**John 1:28**). Later on, he was baptising in

⁷ Elijah was the prophet who (with God) defeated the prophets of Baal at Mt Carmel (**1 Kings 18:20-40**), prayed for no rain to cause a drought and then prayed for it to rain again – which it did (**James 5:17-18; 1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-46**), and was eventually taken up to Heaven in a whirlwind (**2 Kings 2:11**).

⁸ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 1, A-C, “Bethabara”, page 526, suggests that it may be on the eastern side of the Jordan across from Jericho.

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Aenon⁹, near Salim (**John 3:23**). **Luke 3:3** tells us that he “...went into all the region around the Jordan...”.

However, despite being away from the towns and cities, he was never short of an audience. The people came out in droves from all over the country to hear him, and to be baptised by him (**Matthew 3:5-6**).

Jesus also came to him to be baptised. John, at first, was hesitant, feeling unworthy of such an honour (**Matthew 3:13-14**). But Jesus insisted, so as to “...fulfill all righteousness...” (**Matthew 3:15**). Seeing the Spirit descend from Heaven like a dove and rest on Jesus confirmed to John that Jesus truly was the Son of God (**John 1:29-34**).

c) His death

At some point during his ministry, John had told Herod the tetrarch¹⁰ that his (*i.e.* Herod's) relationship with Herodias was unlawful – he had his brother Philip's wife¹¹ (**Matthew 14:3-4**). He had also rebuked Herod for his evil deeds (**Luke 3:19**). This resulted in John being locked up in prison (**Luke 3:20**).

Herodias, and to some extent Herod¹², both wanted to have John killed because of these rebukes¹³ (**Mark 6:17-19**). But Herod was afraid to put him to death because the multitudes considered John to be a prophet (**Matthew 14:5**).

However, the opportunity presented itself for Herodias on the occasion of Herod's birthday. During the celebrations, Herod foolishly made an oath to his daughter, before many witnesses, that she could have anything she wanted. Her mother (Herodias) told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. And so, in order to save face, Herod gave the order, and John was beheaded (**Matthew 14:6-12**).

2) John's qualities

John, no doubt, had many notable qualities. Even Herod could see that he was a “...just and holy man...” (**Mark 6:20a**). When Jesus spoke of him, He said “...among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist...” (**Matthew 11:11**). But in this lesson, I just want to just briefly mention two qualities of John that can be lessons for us today;

- his sense of purpose, and,
- his humility

a) His sense of purpose

John was given a specific mission by God – to “...prepare the way for the Lord...” (**Matthew 3:3**). As we've seen above, this work involved not just

⁹ The exact location is uncertain – see The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 1, A-C, “Aenon”, pages 66-67.

¹⁰ As tetrarch, Herod was ruler over Galilee. His brother Philip was tetrarch over Iturea and Trachonitis (the area north east of the Sea of Galilee) - **Luke 3:1**.

¹¹ The Law stated that a man shall not take his brother's wife, unless the brother has died without having a son (**Leviticus 18:16; 20:21; Deuteronomy 25:5**).

¹² **Mark 6:20** states that Herod also feared John, and gladly heard him.

¹³ It is not uncommon for people who, when told of their sins, want to either justify their actions, or discredit the messenger, rather than repent (**John 3:19-20**).

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baptising, but also preaching and teaching, something he did without fear or favour. He was not intimidated by the hypocritical religious leaders of the day (**Matthew 3:7, Luke 7:30**). Nor did he hold back from telling Herod¹⁴, a ruler in the land, that there were things in his life that needed addressing (**Luke 3:19**). Until he was locked up in prison, nothing hindered or distracted John from doing what God had ordained him to do.

His message to the people also contained a sense of urgency. They needed to repent, *i.e.* they needed to have a godly sorrow for their sins, and change their ways (**2 Corinthians 7:9-10**), for “...*the kingdom of heaven is at hand...*” (**Matthew 3:2**). They ought not delay, for “...*the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cast down and thrown into the fire...*”¹⁵ (**Matthew 3:10**). No-one knows when their time here on earth will end, so the time to change and get right with God is “now”, “today” (**Hebrews 3:13; 2 Corinthians 6:2b**).

b) His humility

John had an important job to do – preparing the way for the Messiah. He was anointed by God for that work (**Luke 1:13-17**), and was honoured by Jesus (**Matthew 11:11a**)¹⁶.

But while John was bold in his preaching and teaching, he was also a humble man. His humility is shown in the following three instances;

- When talking of the “*One who was coming*” after him, he said of himself that he was “...*not worthy to stoop down and loose (His sandal-strap)...*” (**Mark 1:7**). Taking off a person’s sandals was a lowly task. It involved getting down on your knees to undo the straps that would be dirty from the road and sweaty feet. But John didn’t consider himself to be even worthy to perform that menial task for the Messiah.
- When Jesus came to be baptised, John, the one who had been at the forefront in baptising people at the time, felt that he (John) should be the one being baptised by Jesus, not the other way around (**Matthew 3:13-15**).
- To some extent, John had been the centre of attention with regard to the spiritual awakening of the people (**Mark 1:5**). He also had his own disciples; people who followed him and learned from him (**John 1:35; 3:25**). But once Jesus started His ministry, people began turning to Him (**John 3:26**). Even some of John’s disciples left to follow Jesus (**John 1:35-37**). But when people came and told John about these things, his reply was simply “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*” (**John 3:30**). John knew that he, himself, was not to be the focus of attention, but Jesus. His role was to be “...*a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe.*” (**John 1:7**).

¹⁴ This is the same Herod that Jesus faced during His trials. Herod was visiting in Jerusalem at the time (**Luke 23:7**).

¹⁵ This is similar to what Jesus taught about the vine and the branches (**John 15:1-6**).

¹⁶ In **Matthew 11:14**, Jesus referred to John as the “Elijah who is to come”, equating John as a great prophet.

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3) Application

So what can we learn from these two qualities of John. What application can we draw that will help us to be more like the type of people God wants us to be?

a) Our purpose

John knew the role that God had set for him, and he set about doing it – it was the focus of his adult life.

As Christians, we also have a specific purpose. Among other things, we are to be “lights” in a world that is lost in spiritual darkness (**Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 4:17-19**).

In the physical world, we use a light when it is dark so that we can see what we are doing. A light also allows us to see any dangers in the way.

As spiritual lights, we have the role of helping the lost to see what they need to see spiritually – the need for, and the way to, salvation. They need to know that they are lost if they remain in their sins. And they need to know that there is a way that they can be saved from their sins. We can be “lights” in whatever circumstance we find ourselves – we don’t all have to be preachers and teachers. We may simply be the person who “...plants the seed...”, or the person who “...waters...” (**1 Corinthians 3:6a**). It may be just a simple conversation, or the showing of a godly attitude, or doing a kindly deed. But it needs to be something, for we know that God will “...give the increase...” (**1 Corinthians 3:6b**).

In the Easy to Read Version Bible, **Colossians 4:5-6** says;

“Be wise in the way you act with those people who are not believers. Use your time in the best way you can. When you talk, you should always be kind and wise. Then you will be able to answer every person in the way you should.”

This requires us to think about the daily situations we find ourselves in. It requires us to be conscious of the way we think, act and talk when in the company of others.

b) Our humility

Although John was a great prophet and teacher, with crowds of people coming out to him to be baptised, he remained ever humble – an example for us.

Romans 12:3 says that each one is “...not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith...”

The passage is not saying that we should consider ourselves as worthless or good for nothing. That is not what being humble means. Rather, it is saying that we should not think that we are better than what we really are. Different people have different talents, abilities, and levels of faith, and there is nothing wrong with acknowledging these. Both Jesus and Paul publically complimented people in these areas (**Matthew 8:10; Philippians 2:25-30**). But thinking soberly causes us to realise that we do have failures and shortcomings, and that ultimately, we need the grace of God for forgiveness (**Ephesians 2:8-9**).

Humility is an attitude; a state of mind (**Philippians 2:5-8**) that is modest and unassuming. It causes us to be considerate of other people, not just of

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ourselves (**Philippians 2:3-4**), and to show others the respect that is due to them.

Without humility, it would be difficult for us to serve others (**John 13:12-15**).

Without humility, it would be difficult for us to acknowledge our sins (**1 John 1:8**).

Without humility, it would be difficult for us to show true agape love towards others (**1 Corinthians 13:4-7**).

Jesus gives us this promise (and warning) in **Luke 14:11**;

“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Conclusion:

John’s ministry was not very long, maybe less than a year¹⁷. But there are things from his life that are examples for us today;

- his focus on what God wanted him to do, and his steadfastness in doing it, and,
- his humility while serving his Lord.

¹⁷ John was born about 6 months before Jesus (**Luke 1:24-45**), and his death occurred during the early part of Jesus’ ministry